

An Open Letter to the Voting Members of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly

We are grateful that the church has called you to serve as a voting member for the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. Your role at the assembly will be a difficult one. We are writing this open letter as Lutheran theologians and church leaders concerned about the fidelity and future of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

**The proposals
are in fact no
compromise**

The proposals to be considered by the Churchwide Assembly this summer from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality are perceived by some as compromises that will permit the ELCA to live faithfully with internal diversity on controversial ethical questions. The proposals are in fact no compromise. They clearly imply that same-sex blessings and the ordination and rostering of homosexual persons in committed relationships are acceptable within the ELCA. The teaching of the church will be changed. We should not make such an important decision without clear biblical and theological support. The Task Force did not provide such support, nor has it been provided in statements from some of our colleagues in ELCA institutions.

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**Indifference to
the one, holy,
catholic and
apostolic
church**

1. If the assembly adopts the proposed rules of procedure, a simple majority of one Churchwide Assembly will alter the moral teaching on sexuality we have shared with the vast majority of the church past and present. We are concerned that such a procedure shows an indifference to the common mind of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church throughout the ages and across cultures. At the least, a two-thirds majority should be required, if indeed the assembly should be voting on these matters at all.

**The church is
founded on
the whole
Word of God,
both law and
gospel**

2. The proposals claim that the ELCA can live with profound differences on sexual questions because our unity is centered exclusively on the gospel and the sacraments. This claim separates law and gospel in a way contrary to both Scripture and the Confessions. The church is founded on the whole Word of God, both law and gospel. The Task Force texts seem to permit variation on all ethical questions, no matter how fundamental. How Christians behave sexually is not a matter of indifference to our life in Christ.

**It would
damage our
ecumenical
relationships**

3. If the ELCA were to approve the public recognition of same-sex unions or the rostering of persons in such relationships, it would damage our ecumenical relationships with the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and Evangelical churches, all of which affirm the clear teaching of Scripture that homosexual activity departs from God's design for marriage and sexuality. Furthermore, it would put the ELCA at odds with many of our sister Lutheran churches, especially in Asia and Africa. The United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) have also recently upheld scriptural teaching on this matter. These bodies have officially recognized that the biblical prohibitions against homosexual activity remain applicable today to consensual sexual relationships between persons of the same sex.

**Our unity will
be fractured**

4. With regard to calling rostered leaders, the statement proposes “structured flexibility,” which we believe will lead inevitably to “local option.” If adopted, this proposal will mean that the relationship among bishops, candidacy committees, and congregations will become confused and conflicted. Practically speaking, there will be two lists of candidates for rostered leadership in the church. The result will be that not all pastors and congregations will be in full fellowship with each other, nor with many of the pastors and congregations of those denominations with whom we are in full communion. Further, laity seeking a congregation to join would need to ask about which option a congregation has chosen in calling its leaders. Our unity in the office of ministry will be fractured.

**Conscience
can err**

5. The social statement calls for opponents in the current controversy to respect each other’s “bound conscience,” referring to Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms. Luther, however, was not merely claiming that he was sincere about the convictions he held; he asserted rather that his conscience was bound to the Word of God. Conscience can err. The Word of God, not conscience, is the final court of appeal in the church.

We are deeply sensitive to the need of the church to provide pastoral care for all people. We are aware that there are some in the church who will disagree with this letter. Nevertheless, we feel we are called to support and advocate the biblical teaching on human sexuality and urge you to defeat all the proposals from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality that the Church Council has forwarded to you. We pledge to you our prayers and we invite you to work with us for the renewal of our church under the Word of God.

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